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EU Statement, Working Session 14-15: Roma/Sinti and, in particular, early education for Roma and Sinti children

Mr./Mrs. Chairperson,

I have the honour to take the floor on behalf of the European Union.

Roma people are disproportionately affected by social exclusion, prejudice and discrimination. Roma communities have been part of European societies for centuries, often marginalised and sometimes persecuted. Many Roma people experience unemployment, low income, reduced life expectancy and poor quality of life. This represents a human tragedy for the individuals concerned as well as an immense loss for society as a whole.

The European Union and its Member States have committed to work for improving the situation of Roma and Sinti. And each Member State for itself, as well as the EU as a whole, has reached some important conclusions so far. Let us focus today on one of

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these conclusions, concerning the role of education and more specifically, early education, in improving the situation of Roma and Sinti.

As the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE area acknowledges, education is a prerequisite for the participation of Roma and Sinti people in the political, social and economic life of their respective countries on equal footing with others. Education does play a fundamental role in attaining the goal of Roma and Sinti inclusion and we have to act for enhancing the implementation of our commitments in this field.

The EU has intensified its focus on this matter recently, both at the political and operational levels, underlining the fact that Roma inclusion policies have to be integrated with mainstream policies in the field of education, as well as in other fields.

The results of the first European Roma Summit, which took place in September 2008, and more recently, the document entitled “Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion”, as discussed at the first meeting of the integrated European platform for Roma inclusion, in April this year, as well as the Council Conclusions on Inclusion of the Roma from June 8, 2009, testify to this approach. Furthermore, in 2008, the EU Commission asserted, in a paper entitled “Community Instruments and Policies for Roma Inclusion”, that “education is the key to successful integration of all people, representing the most effective way of breaking the cycle of intergenerational deprivation... In the case of the Roma, improvements in access to and the quality of education constitute a significant opportunity to overcome the current situation of

exclusion". We look forward to the second European Roma Summit that the Spanish Presidency of the EU will organize in April 2010 for further impetus to dealing with such issues.

What we would like to emphasize today is that early education can make a difference in tackling problems that Roma and Sinti children are confronted with later in the educational cycle. First of all, because it would facilitate insertion into the primary school and, as a consequence, it would stimulate school enrolment. Secondly, because it would allow children be placed on a safe and promising road from the very beginning. And thirdly, a good start in education would limit the absenteeism and the school drop-out and work successfully through all stages of education.

In this respect, we believe that measures should be taken or continue to be applied in the whole OSCE area, so as to permit us to reap the benefits that I just mentioned.

Examples of such measures could be investing the local authorities (schools, town halls, etc.) with the responsibility of undertaking awareness raising initiatives on the benefits of early education for Roma and Sinti children, special programs for Roma and non-Roma educators that work with Roma children, identifying solutions that could diminish the disadvantage caused by the lack of early education in the regular form ("summer kindergarten").

We recall that the Decision of the Helsinki Ministerial Council, from 2008, urges states to promote early education for Roma and Sinti children as an instrument for preventing social exclusion and marginalization. Early education is a long-term investment which, in

the end, will pay off. Therefore, it is worth intensifying our efforts so as to transform our commitments into action and results.

In this endeavor, we look forward to ODIHR's active assistance of participating States in promoting Roma and Sinti children's access to early education.

In setting-up or continuing early education programs, we need to pay particular attention to issues such as discrimination and separation/segregation of Roma and Sinti children that still persist, according to the ODIHR's Status Report 2008 on the Implementation of the Action Plan. The European Union has offered legal protection against discrimination, including in the field of education, since 2000, when a directive was enacted in this respect. Several other documents followed, promoting equal access to education, so Member States are still working to that end.

Recommendations

1. Improving early education for Roma and Sinti children should follow an inclusive approach, covering all levels (legislative, institutional, operational);
2. Efforts for improving access to education, achieving desegregation and increasing the quality of education should start from the stage of early education for Roma and Sinti;

3. Establishing or improving early education for Roma and Sinti should be a process where representatives of those communities are involved.

Thank you, Mr./Mrs. Chairperson.

The Candidate Countries Turkey, Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, the Countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidates Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia, EFTA countries Iceland and Norway, members of the European Economic Area, as well as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Armenia and Georgia align themselves with this statement.

* Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.